The Basque Country that I Know

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The Basque Country that I know -- has changed. Two snapshots, one from the first visit I took in 1974 when I was twelve and my most recent trip - thirty years later in the fall of 2004 - provide bookends to my perceptions of the Basque Country.

In the fall of 1974, my father, the late Dr. Pat Bieter, inaugurated a Boise State University studies abroad program in Onati, a small town in the Basque Country. Along with my four siblings and our mother Eloise (Garmendia) Bieter, we left for a year of living and studying in Euskadi, The Basque Country. After a full twenty-four hours of traveling, the Guardia Civil - Spanish Civil Guard and Franco's oppressive forces in the Basque region - escorted us into this new town. A few weeks before we arrived, small bombs had gone off in the buildings where the program was to be housed. Area residents had no idea who we were, why we were coming, or what we wanted, and articles circulated that the international program was a front for a covert CIA operation.

We arrived during Franco's last year of power before his death. For nearly four decades his regime had sought to eliminate the Basque language and culture. The systematic oppression resulted in a Basque Country robbed of its wealth, with a horrendous infrastructure and an underground Basque language and culture struggling to survive. On my morning walk to school, I passed Onati's Univerity (built in 1524), old buildings, churches and crumbling infrastructure laid out centuries before the automobile. I remember the blatant stares of townspeople who had never seen an

American. However, the dominant image of my walk remains of the Guardia Civil station where soldiers stood with their fingers on machine gun triggers. For a young boy who, in Boise, Idaho, walked a block to St. Joseph's School, and was taught that the police were friendly, this was quite a shock.

Thirty years later I'm on the steps of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. Earlier I had met with family and friends we had made on that first trip thirty years ago. The area remains green from all of the moisture, the traditional landmarks still stand and yet so much has changed since that first trip. As I look up I see the mountains and the farmhouses that represent a subsistence way of life for Basque families for centuries – including most all of those who came to Idaho. Very few operate as farms today; increasingly they serve as get away cottages or bed and breakfasts for tourists.

At the foot of the mountains winds the Nervion River and a park that commemorates the shipbuilding and steel industry that flourished along these banks for decades. One of the early European zones to industrialize, Bilbao became the Pittsburgh of Europe - supplying it with steel, and shipping and receiving goods from all over the world. The accompanying pollution devastated the landscape and the river was dead of virtually all life.

Today, in place of ships, steel, and pollution, stands the titanium-plated Guggenheim, the symbol of the transformed Basque Country. Designed by an American architect and frequented by tourists from all over the world, one witnesses the international setting of a previously insulated world. The Guggenheim also represents the significant wealth of the region. Always one of Spain's wealthiest

areas, since the Franco era the Basque Country has been able to keep most of the funds in the region and the investment in the local economy astounds this visitor of thirty years ago. The ship-shaped building also recalls the fishing and whaling that first took the Basques away from their homeland and eventually to the New World.

Along side this modernity, the ancient language and culture attempt to blend. The metro welcomes riders in Basque, as do all official signs around the city. While Spanish remains the dominant language in this city of over a million inhabitants, increasingly parents are enrolling their students in state-sponsored educational options primarily conducted in Euskera (the Basque language).

Indeed, throughout their history, Euskera most separated the Basques from other groups. An historian once told me that the Basque Country has always had one foot in the past and another in the future. These two snapshots certainly taught me that. Yet, while one focused on politics and another on economics, the common thread of the language continues as the cultural characteristic unique to the Basques.